MMR_0497 Steve Blackson Lone Star Region

Steve retired...well almost...he designs garden railways for others!

The Texas Garden Railroaders has about 15 families involved — spread out over Central Texas, says Steve Blackson, an active participant. “We’re just an ad hoc group,” Blackson says. “All we do is get together and run trains.”

Five times, the group has put on a self-guided tour called Spring Bloom, in which people could visit garden railroads at various locations.

The last tour was in 2014, but the group intends to start it up again, Blackson says. The 2014 tour included a stop at the San Antonio Garden Railroad Engineers Society railroads at the Texas Transportation Museum. As well, the Texas Garden Railroaders has set up a garden train for the past two years for the Zilker Garden Festival, Blackson says. Like many others, Blackson, 68, got more involved in this pastime once he retired.

Before then, though, he had spent his spare time with the more popular HO-model railroads, which are for indoor use, he says. "I spent over 30 years in the garage. My wife never parked in the garage," he says. "When I retired, I traded my wife the garage for the backyard."

About that time, he says, the pricing for G-gauge became more affordable. And he was thrilled to get to be outside. Blackson took two years to build his setup. His trains run on battery across 350 feet of track that winds around his Anderson Mill-area yard. His setup is a realistic, point-to-point depiction of a railway running in places such as Fredericksburg and Llano.

"Mine is set in the 1930s, no later than the 1940, pre-war," Blackson says. Currently, his garden railroad is undergoing extensive maintenance, including repair of a retaining wall.

In general, he says, "The maintenance is 95 percent in the garden. The train takes very little maintenance." But it's worth the effort: "It's beautiful when it's all together." In 2010, Blackson also started a part-time business, Windy Point Garden Railroads, navigating the difficulties and setting up garden railroads for others. He has designed and/or built 13 so far, he says.

"Outside, our No. 1 thing we have to worry about is drainage," he says. "We have to put in hardscape, which means bringing in landscaping contractors."

Blackson, recognized as a "master model railroader" by the National Model Railroad Association, says it takes roughly one year for a job, from planning to completion. In Mississippi, he did a large project with 750 feet of track, 14 bridges, a river with two waterfalls and more. "It's very impressive," he says."